

“Who is My Mother?”

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BRANDON: Mother Jesus

Who is my mother? I can't think of an easier question for our son Dominic to answer, so easy in fact that I can't even imagine him actually ever asking it. For him, learning who is mother is was just a part of learning where his next meal was coming from, who was going to respond to his cries for help, who was going to hold him until he falls asleep, who was going to pick him up when he fell, who was going to change his clothes (who was going to change her clothes!) for the fourth time that day for God knows what reason because baby messes are no discriminator of person. Knowing who his mother is not like learning something he didn't know, but discovering something he can't help but know. It would be like learning that you have a body or that you get hungry--something that you already knew but didn't have a name for. Knowing his mother is just knowing the presence of the one who laughs, and feeds, and plays, and cries and loves and lives right alongside him, as if there is no obvious place where his life ends and her life begins. Some things in our lives are so bone deep, so present in who we are that there is no space even to ask ourselves who or what they are. You know them before you even know yourself.

I know it's not like that for many children who for whatever reason have been separated from their mothers., but I can imagine that it was like this for Jesus. Part of the mystery of God's presence in the life of Jesus is that he too, like Dom, knew who his mother was long before he knew who he was. There was no obvious point, there at the beginning, where her life ended and his life began. There was no space for him to even entertain the question Who is my mother?

Knowing Mary as momma goes bone deep for Jesus. It's the kind of thing that sticks with you. I like to think that it was his own mamma he had in mind when he looked over the city of Jerusalem, lamenting how little his own ministry was going to accomplish. “Jerusalem Jerusalem..how often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing, and you were not willing.” It is surely the deep and powerful reality of motherhood that Jesus is banking on here in comparing himself to that mother hen. Only here Jesus shows that even the deep things in our lives are difficult and fragile. Sometimes, your ability to birth, to nurture, to protect, and to gather together is withheld from you, for whatever reason. Your mothering can only go so far and then the

world steps in, reminding us that mothering is not without its losses. When all is said and done, Mother Jesus will not gather the children of Jerusalem and Mother Mary must suffer the pain of losing her son. These are among the stark difficulties of mothering. Nothing is deeper, nothing is more fragile.

But then again Jesus has a way of getting us to look closer at those bone deep realities in us, making us return to things we thought we already knew. And the same goes for motherhood. At one point during his ministry, when Jesus is told that his own mother wants to see him, he asks the very question that we thought was impossible. “Who is my mother?” and he looks around at his disciples, those following him, and says “YOU are my mother. My mother is anyone who hear the word of God and does it.”

NATALIE: Mother Tabitha

“Who is my mother?” I think this question meant something to Tabitha, the disciple of Jesus that we find dead in the scripture from Acts 8 we read today. “Who is my mother?” Perhaps the question echoed in the ears and hearts and homes of those who survived her. Women weeping into the garments *she* made for them when she was alive. Men pounding their grief into the dirt roads with each hurried step, searching for Peter. How could they possibly go on without Tabitha? Good, persistent, devoted, supportive, generous Tabitha. The one who mothered them all.

We don’t know much about Tabitha’s life story. Though she was obviously quite well-known in her own time. Did you notice how Peter drops what he’s doing when he hears about her death and immediately goes to her? As if he’s running to grieve for an old friend? How when he arrives, Tabitha’s body is surrounded by those whose lives she had poured herself into? How the text goes out of its way to give Tabitha the title, “disciple”? All of this makes me wonder if Tabitha was not just a “follower of Jesus” in the spiritual sense, but if she had actually followed Jesus during his ministry, before his death and resurrection – if she was a friend of Jesus, a friend of Peter and the other disciples, a benefactor and co-minister.

Luke 8 talks about a group of women who accompanied Jesus and supported him financially as he travelled throughout Galilee and Judea: It says, “The twelve were with him, as well as some women...: Mary, called Magdalene...

and Joanna... and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources." Maybe disciple Tabitha was one of these women. If she was, she'd have been there as Jesus told parables and calmed storms and cast out demons. She'd have been there when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who is my mother?" Perhaps she locked eyes with Jesus as he pointed at her and the others with her and said, "You! You are my mother - whoever hears the word of God and does it!"

Tabitha heard the word of God and did it. Acts tells us that she was devoted to good *works* and *acts* of charity. Tabitha got. stuff. done. Her faith led to action, and I can't help but wonder if it was Jesus' question, "Who is my mother?" that prompted her generosity, her care for those around her, her creativity and the deep relationships she fostered.

Did Tabitha have any children of her own? We don't know. If she did, they are nowhere to be seen at her deathbed. Perhaps they were painfully estranged from her? Or perhaps their deaths preceded her own? Maybe Tabitha wanted children but couldn't have them. Or maybe she gave children up to someone who could care for them when she could not.

Regardless of her biological status as a mother, Tabitha mothered Jesus, providing for him & supporting him. Tabitha mothered the other disciples with her friendship and care. Tabitha mothered the widows in Joppa, providing them with clothing she made herself, doing good works on their behalf. Tabitha is the model of a true disciple, who picks up Jesus' call to mother the world.

Tabitha mirrors Christ in life, so perhaps it isn't all that surprising that she mirrors him in death (and life after death), as well. Tabitha could well have been one of the women Luke tells us about, who saw where Jesus' body was laid after his crucifixion, who prepared spices and ointments to care for his body, and who were the first to receive news of his resurrection. Were those same spices and ointments prepared for her body, too? Was she cared for by the same women who cared, alongside her, for Jesus' body?

Was Tabitha one of the women who raced to Peter and the others to announce the good news? Those words that seemed an idle tale to a perplexed Peter then, but now, the same Peter kneels at Tabitha's deathbed, prays, and says with confidence, "Tabitha, get up." She locks eyes with him and rises. A mother's work is never done.

BRANDON AND NATALIE: Mother Church

B: Who is my mother? It's a question that we, as the church, can ask ourselves. Who has mothered the church into being?

N: Mother Jesus, who taught us to seek the gathering of all God's children as a mother hen seeks her chicks;

B: Mother Mary who taught us to sing of the day when the lowly shall be raised up and the hungry shall be fed;

N: Mother Tabitha, who taught us to clothe and feed the least among us;

B: Mother Paul who compares himself to a nursing mother that feeds a baby church that was only just born;

N: Mother Julian who reminds us that mothering is something God also does;

B: Mother Jean Vanier, who taught us through the L'Arche communities how to mother those with mental disabilities that our society casts aside;

N: Mother Rachel Held Evans, who proclaimed space for all of us outcasts and misfits at God's table.

B: We could do this all day couldn't we? Recounting the ones both widely known and deeply personal that have mothered us into the church.

N: Who is my mother? Jesus asks, and then points to you. To us. Jesus calls us, as individuals and as a church, to pick up this work of mothering that so defines his own ministry. We are mothers of Christ in the same way that we are mothers to the world. "I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was in prison, and you visited me."

Church - what kind of mother are we? Do our good works and acts of charity, like Tabitha's, birth Christ into our world again and again? Or do we turn away from the people God calls us to care for? "As you did to the least of these, you did it to me."

B: In a world where mothers are ripped from their children, where maternal mortality rates are significantly higher for women of color, where thousands of unconvicted mothers get stuck in jail, pre-trial, many of whom do not have

enough bail money to buy their freedom and reunite with their kids, where the sometimes tragic difficulty of becoming a mother in this world is glossed over by easy slogans and restrictive policies, we have to ask ourselves what it means to be a mothering church in a world where the realities of motherhood often suffer under the weight of injustice.

N: Mother Church - How wide are our arms stretching, really? Who can't seem to fit in these arms of ours? Who don't we want to fit? It's a question we have to continually return to, because we are not called to be a mother who embraces only our own, but a mother who embraces the whole world.

B: As a mother church, we are called to bear and feed and clothe and wash and gather together in our motherly arms *all* the children of God. So it should not surprise us if it turns out that we have nothing better to do than to open our arms of love as wide as possible toward the world, occupying ourselves with nothing else than full embrace of God's children. For that is what our saint mothers have done.

N: This Mother's Day, we invite all of you, regardless of your gender, to receive a flower as you leave today as a reminder of the call of Jesus on each of our lives, and on the life of this church, to mother the world gently, fiercely, with care and responsibility and wide open arms.